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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: PRESIDENT OBASANJO'S DELTA STRATEGY?

REF: (A) Abuja 1486, (B) Abuja 1472

Classified by: Ambassador John Campbell for reasons 1.5
(B) and (D)

11. (S) Summary: Judith B. Asuni, the head of the NGO Academic Associates PeaceWorks and close to Obasanjo and Stephen L. Davis, a consultant working for Shell, debriefed me on what they say is Obasanjo's current thinking on the Delta and foreshadowed a request for assistance from the U.S., UK and the Dutch for countering criminal behavior in the Delta. End summary.

12. (S) Asuni and Davis said that they spent several hours with President Obasanjo the evening of August 31 on the Delta. Also present were representatives of the Delta youth gangs. Davis said that over the past few days there has been significant bloodshed in Port Harcourt (where he is based) that has not been reported in the Nigerian media. He said that the president complained that news of Delta developments did not reach him. According to Asuni and Davis, Obasanjo betrayed little knowledge of the corruption of the Nigerian navy, which plays an important role in facilitating oil bunkering, or of corruption within the Rivers state government. They said that Nigerian businessman Otile (frequently identified as a bunkering kingpin) is widely regarded as untouchable because he is so close to Obasanjo--and that the people around Obasanjo ensure that he does not hear of the wrongdoing committed by any of his close associates. Nevertheless, Obasanjo appeared to have reached the following conclusion: that bunkering fueled the influx of arms into the Delta which were basic to the power of various youth gangs, militias, and criminal elements. But, Obasanjo believes that Nigeria does not have the ability to "manage," let alone "police," the off-shore Nigeria Exclusive Economic Zone. And that "management" or "policing" was essential to bring bunkering under control. To do that, Obasanjo believes he will need outside help. These ideas would be developed in the Delta study, to which Obasanjo referred in his meeting with Sen. Hagel (REFTEL B).

13. (S) The Delta study, according to Asuni and Davis, is being coordinated by the General Managing Director of the Nigerian National Petroleum corporation, who is drawing on the State Security Service and other internal intelligence sources. They thought that the Delta study would mostly focus on domestic factors, but growing out of it would be a request for foreign assistance. Specifically, Asuni and Davis said that Obasanjo is likely to ask the U.S., UK and the Dutch governments for assistance in interdicting the flow of arms into the Delta, the suppression of bunkering, and money laundering. Obasanjo appeared to recognize that such assistance was likely to involve a foreign military component--Asuni and Davis talked about aerial and satellite surveillance of shipping in the Gulf of Guinea. Asuni and Davis said that the Delta youth representatives (not further defined) also present at the August 31 meeting, supported the concept of international help, though earlier they had reacted angrily to reports of U.S. military exercises in the Gulf of Guinea.

14. (S) Comment: I cannot rule out that my visit by Asuni and Davis was instigated by the Villa to foreshadow a future conversation on U.S. assistance. Obasanjo often prefers to work through non-governmental intermediaries, and Asuni has been a close associate of his for years. She has frequently facilitated U.S. mission appointment requests with Obasanjo, and she has been a USAID contractor in the past. Shell oil is the largest petroleum company operating in Nigeria, and its operations are highly exposed to violence as they are mostly land-based. Shell, along with the other major oil companies, would like a robust international effort to address Delta violence, and I suspect there might be a self-serving dimension to its involvement with this initiative. The areas where Asuni and Davis say Obasanjo is likely to ask for international assistance are also credible. They portray Obasanjo as just waking up to the serious implications of Delta violence to his presidency, to the long-term viability of Nigeria. They also emphasize the

political difficulties Obasanjo would have in confronting the corruption and complicity with oil bunkering that runs right through the political and military establishments in Nigeria.

15. (S) comment Continued: In my view, they underestimate how much Obasanjo would be asking us for, and the political difficulties Obasanjo would create for himself by an obvious U.S. military presence in the Gulf of Guinea. Their contention that Obasanjo is only just now waking up to the magnitude of the Delta crisis lacks credibility. The next step will be to see the study Obasanjo has commissioned. End Comment.
CAMPBELL